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Voices of the dead: Underworld narratives in Bacchylides' *Ode* 5 and *Odyssey* 11

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Abstract: This article identifies the influence of the Homeric 'Poetics of Hades' in Greek Lyric and argues for an aetiological relationship between the persistent presentation of the lyric poet's subjective voice and the freedom of speech introduced in Homer's Underworld. The article demonstrates this relationship through an examination of Bacchylides' *Ode* 5 and argues that the lyric poet consciously innovates upon Homer's underworld narratives by allowing his Meleager to occupy the stage and takes the audience through his agonising last minutes by describing what dying feels like in his own voice. In doing so, Bacchylides presents his audeience with a Meleager who glosses over his heroic actions and moments of glory in favour for a more emotional and subjective view of his past, filled with regret and self-pity. In this respect the hero is no different from the ghost of Achilles who dismisses honour after death for the simple privilege of seeing the light of the sun, or Agamemnon who is consumed by the memory of his wife's treachery while having nothing to say about his glorious exploits at Troy. This powerful retelling of the story of a great epic hero of the past looks, I argue, simultaneously backwards and forwards, since on the one hand it is inherited from Homer's 'Poetics of Hades', while on the other, it anticipates the emotional and unmediated voices of the heroes and heroines of the tragic stage.

Keywords: Bacchylides, Homer, Hades, Meleager, Alternative narratives, Kleos, Death

At the beginning of her extensive study of the fifth *Ode*, Mary Lefkowitz states that «Bacchylides is a conventional poet and no-one begins to speak of him without apology».[1] A strong statement indeed, but one that nevertheless has been proven to hold at least some truth: Bacchylides' frequent use of Homeric language, in conjunction with the alleged simplicity of his poetry when compared to Pindar's

1 Lefkowitz 1969, 45.

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grandiose compositions, has made scholars in the past feel obliged to justify their engagement with the poet. Scholars have accused Bacchylides, among other things, for lack of inspiration as well as poetic depth, limited scope of description and imagery and finally scarcity of poetic appeal.[2] The tendency to consider Bacchylides' work only under the shadow of his great rival, the sublime Pindar,[3] led to a monolithic approach to the poet's work that seeks mostly to identify shortcomings through direct comparison with Pindar's compositions.

Recent scholarship, however, has shown an increased appreciation of Bacchylides' work by identifying a poetic directness as well as an innovative reworking of Homeric language and motifs behind what was previously thought as a mere imitation of epic forms. Already from the second half of the 20th century scholars such as Lefkowitz, Burnett, Segal, Maehler, Fearn, McDevitt and more recently Cairns, set out to defend Bacchylides' art and have placed him in a new perspective, ushering in a new era of interest in the poet's work.[4]

In this paper, I want to contribute to the recent interest in Bachhylides' work by examining and identifying a poetic technique the poet employs in *Ode* 5, which has not been appreciated so far. Bacchylides in his narrative of Heracles' *katabasis* brings the unreachable Underworld within alarmingly close distance to his audience and this, I argue, has implications for the way the story of Meleager is narrated. The meeting with Heracles offers Meleager's shade the opportunity to relate his own story in an unmediated manner, which recalls the underworld narratives of *Odyssey* 11, while differing significantly from the way epic tradition presents and commemorates him. In contrast with previous scholarship my focus will not be on the many similarities in language and style that can be observed between *Ode* 5 and the 'Nekyia', but instead on the way the poet constructs his underworld narrative by giving voice to the shade of Meleager to relate his own

2 Burnett 1985, 2–3 sums up the negative criticism of Bacchylides' poetic prowess from the discovery and publication of *P.Lond.inv*. 733 in 1897, to modern day scholarship. Cairns 2010, 14–16 also offers a comprehensive history of criticism and further notes that such negative assessments of the poet can still be found, as for example in Pelliccia 2009, 257.

3 See for instance Longinus *Subl*. 33.5 as well as the scholion Σ *ad N*. 3.143, where the scholiast suggests that Pindar compares himself to an eagle and Bacchylides to a jackdaw. For a discussion of the scholion's significance see Phillips 2016, 78–80. For the rivalry of the two poets see Cairns 2010, 6, especially n. 27 with further bibliography.

4 Lefkowitz 1969 and 1976; Burnett 1985; Segal 1998; Maehler 2004; Fearn 2007; McDevitt 2009. As Cairns 2010, 16, puts it, in recent scholarship the poet is «appreciated in his own right as a poet whose technique and talent demonstrate the flexibility of the epinician template in matching the poet's skill to the patron's circumstances». See also Currie 2012 who explores the use and function of space in Pindar and Bacchylides, as well as Calame 2013, who offers a comparative reading of the two poets' dithyrambs in terms of scope, poetics etc.

story as he chooses to remember it.[5] My reading will attempt to highlight those elements in Bacchylides' technique that look back to the narrative strategies of *Odyssey* 11, thus demonstrating an inherited understanding of Hades as space of poetic freedom, that allows for an alternative version of the past to be heard. Bacchylides I argue is aware of the poetic and meta-poetic potential of Hades and indeed exploits it in his narrative in the fifth *Ode*.

Ode 5, composed for the occasion of the victory of Hieron, the tyrant of Syracuse, in the Olympic games of 476 BC, is perhaps one of the most well-studied works of Bacchylides. Hieron's stallion, Pherenicus, did justice to its name (the 'victory bringer') and brought victory in the horse race to his owner, who in turn commissioned Bacchylides with the composition of a victory ode. The epinician ode that Bacchylides composed, although it generally follows the norm of the genre, is unique for several reasons.[6] To begin with, already from the opening of *Ode* 5 Bacchylides departs from standard practice by replacing the traditional invocation to the Muses with the invocation of the mortal victor Hieron,[7] followed by an opening praise of the tyrant and Pherenicus, that occupies the first part of the ode (1–55). The unusual practice of invoking a mortal man must have had great impact upon the audience's expectations and would have helped to place the proem under the theme of mortality: man is equated with god only to be reminded in the central mythic narrative (56–175) of the unbridgeable distance that separates his nature from the divine.[8] The story of Meleager's death with its allusions to Heracles's fate makes it clear that all men, even the most prominent ones, must die.[9] If Hieron was sick at the time of the commission, as has been

5 Those similarities have been amply observed and discussed by previous scholarship, to the extent that some scholars characterised Bacchylides as a mere imitator of Homer, see for instance Buss 1913. *Ode* 5 has also provided the critics of the poet with ammunition: Lefkowitz 1969, in her extended study of the *Ode*, defends Bacchylides but admits that the poet openly imitates Homer.

6 The ode celebrates the same victory as Pindar's first *Olympian*. It is possible that Hieron commissioned both poets only to choose at the end the ode to be performed on the occasion. For the dating of *Ode* 5 and the first *Olympian* see Cairns 2010, 75–76. For a comprehensive analysis of the ode's structure see Cairns 2010, 77–92.

7 *Ode* 5.1–2: εὔμοιρε Συρακοσίων
ἱπποδινήτων στραταγέ
Well-destined general
of the horse-whirled Syracusans
For a discussion see Lefkowitz 1969, 49 and Goldhill 1983, 66–67.

8 Lefkowitz 1976, 44–45.

9 Bacchylides appears to use Meleager's fate (and alludes to Heracles') as a comment on the unpredictability of human fortune and a few lines later (55) drives the point home by stating that «no mortal on earth was ever blessed in everything». Cairns 2010, 226–227 sees a possible allusion to initiation rites and the *Hymn to Demeter*, where it is stated that men can be happy on

suggested, then the pessimistic message of Bacchylides' mythic narrative would have been quite appropriate for the occasion.[10]

In any case the opening part of the poem is structured around Hieron and Pherenicus and the poet's intention to honour them both. After the much-discussed metaphor of the unobstructed flight of the eagle, the "messenger of Zeus", Bacchylides refers to the ability of his song to flow through "countless paths" (5.16–36),[11] and then moves on to the praise of Pherenicus' performance which concludes the first part of the ode. The poet vouches for the achievement of Hieron's stallion by "pressing [his hand] on the ground" (5.42 γᾷ δ' ἐπισκήπτων πιφαύσκω), an unusual but telling gesture. It is tempting to see here an allusion to *Iliad* 9.568–569 where Phoenix, while relating Meleager's story, describes Althaea calling upon Hades and Persephone by beating the earth with her hands. It is not possible to argue with any certainty that Bacchylides in this instance employs this particular Homeric motif – after all, the motif seems to be used extensively in Greek literature as an invocation of underworld deities.[12] Whether the gesture was meant to be a part of the *Ode*'s performance is impossible to determine, however its inclusion mirrors Althaea's action and places the poet in the role of the evoker of Hades. A possible link between *Ode* 5 and *Iliad* 9 is further suggested by several other indications. To begin with, Bacchylides' extensive use of epic language in the opening lines reveals the intention of the poet to «draw on the oral past»,[13] by means of adapting its conventions in order to suit his own aims. Lefkowitz argues that this is part of a strategy that the poet follows throughout the *Ode*; by alluding

earth if they have witnessed the Eleusinian rites (480–482). For the motif of human fate and its unpredictability see Herodotus on Croesus 1.70–92 and Polycrates 3.40–43, but also Bacchylides *Ode* 3, particularly 29–36.

10 For Hieron's illness see Steffen 1961, 19 and Stern 1967, 38–39. Bacchylides' reference to himself as ξένος (*Ode* 5.10) may or may not imply an existing relationship between the poet and Hieron, see Brannan 1972, 213–215 and Cairns 2010, 218–219 with further bibliography. If ξένος here indicates that poet and patron shared not only a professional relationship but also a personal one, then an interpretation of the *Ode*'s pessimism as a response to Hieron's illness would be more plausible.

11 For the eagle metaphor and its possible polemic allusions towards Pindar see Stern 1967, 38–39, especially n. 14. Lefkowitz 1976, 48–49, argues that the metaphor refers to Hieron as the victor and so Goldhill 1983, 68–69. See contra Cairns 2010, 79–80, who argues that the eagle is a shared metaphor for the poet and Pherenicus. See further Svarlien 1995 for a discussion of the imagery and its significance in the opening and closing praises.

12 See Maehler 2004, 116 and Cairns 2010, 225 who cite examples of the practice in Homer and elsewhere. An interesting parallel can be found in Near Eastern literature where in *An Assyrian Prince's Dream of the Netherworld*, the prince evokes the deities of the Underworld by beating the ground with his fists.

13 Lefkowitz 1969, 48.

to well-known epic forms, Bacchylides creates a familiar frame for his audience only to alter it and establish, often through linguistic innovation, his poetic individuality.[14] The best way for that individuality to come to the forefront, as most Greek poets would verify, is by its contrast to an acclaimed prototype. Seen from this angle Bacchylides' gesture appears to carry certain gravity.[15] For by looking back at Althaea's invocation in *Il.* 9, the poet kills two birds with one stone: first he prepares the ground for the underworld scene he is about to introduce by using an underworld invocation – a practice present in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*: Hades needs to be called upon before it appears.[16] Second, by evoking Althaea's actions Bacchylides recalls the Homeric narrative of Meleager's story against which his own story will be developed. Thus, if the poet indeed composed line 42 with *Il.* 9 in mind, he fulfilled an important convention by calling upon Hades, whereas he further prepared his audience for the retelling of Meleager's story that is to follow.

Bacchylides concludes his opening praise with a warning about the fragile nature of human happiness (50–55) when Heracles is introduced rather unexpectedly into the scene:

τ[ὼς καί π]οτ' ἐρειψιπύλαν
παῖδ' ἀνίκ]ατον λέγουσιν
δῦναι Διὸς] ἀργικεραύ-
νου δώματα Φερσεφόνας τανισφύρου,
καρχαρόδοντα κύν' ἄ-
ξοντ' ἐς φάος ἐξ Ἀΐδα,
υἱὸν ἀπλάτοι' Ἐχίδνας·
ἔνθα δυστάνων βροτῶν
ψυχὰς ἐδάη παρὰ Κωκυτοῦ ῥεέθροις,
οἷά τε φύλλ' ἄνεμος
Ἴδας ἀνὰ μηλοβότους
πρῶνας ἀργηστὰς δονεῖ.

(*Ode* 5.56–67)

They say that once the gate-destroying, unconquerable son of Zeus of the gleaming thunderbolt went down into the house of slim-ankled Persephone to bring to the light from Hades the rough-toothed dog, the son of unapproachable Echidna. There he

14 Lefkowitz 1969, 49 ff.

15 Davies/Finglass 2014, 313, argue that innovation is the standard strategy Greek poets follow to achieve poetic individuality. See also Graziosi/Haubold 2009, 106.

16 See for instance Achilles' ritualistic behaviour at *Il.* 23.24–34, which precedes the appearance of Patroclus' ghost, and of course the detailed ritual of Odysseus at the outskirts of Hades at *Od.* 11.24–37. See also Gazis 2018, 56 ff.

> learnt about the souls of the unfortunate mortals beside the stream of Cocytus, like the leaves that the wind swirls around the bright sheep-pasturing peaks of Ida.[17]

Heracles' introduction takes up 3 lines throughout, in which Bacchylides withholds the hero's name, providing instead an amassment of adjectives (e. g. ἐρειψιπύλαν, ἀνίκατον, παῖδ' ... ἀργικεραύνου, 5.55–57), which would have probably offered adequate information for the audience to identify him.[18] This collection of epithets has an effect also on a narrative level as it helps set up an epic tone,[19] marking the transition from the contemporary success of Hieron to the narration of the heroic past. Heracles' entrance creates an 'epic expectation' to the audience which is further reinforced by the many Homeric undertones as well as allusions to *Odyssey* 11 that Bacchylides employs.

To begin with, the transition from the world of Hieron's victory to the Underworld is highlighted through the strategic use of epic conventions: by placing Zeus's Homeric epithet ἀργικεραύνου, ('he of the gleaming thunder' 5.57), right before 'slim-ankled' Persephone's chambers (5.58 δώματα Φερσεφόνας τανισφύρου), Bacchylides creates a sharp contrast of light and darkness, that recalls the Homeric incompatibility of the two worlds and alludes to the dark and murky nature of the Underworld.[20] Only two lines into the narrative, and we can feel the abrupt transition from the bright peaks of Olympus to the dark chambers of Hades where Persephone dwells.

When Heracles' objective is introduced, the contrast of the two worlds comes under the spotlight: the hero's task is to capture Cerberus and "bring him into the light from Hades" (5.61). This «direct verbal echo of Heracles' speech» (κύν' ἄξοντ') from the 'Nekyia' is a strong indication that Bacchylides is here thinking of *Odyssey* 11.[21] Furthermore the juxtaposition of φάος and Ἀΐδα in line 61,

17 All translations of *Ode* 5 are taken from Cairns 2010.

18 Cf. Maehler 2004, 117. The technique used is similar to that of the proem of the *Odyssey* where the audience is invited to identify the protagonist through his traditional epithets – Odysseus' name appearing for the first time only in *Od*. 1.21.

19 Lefkowitz 1969, 65. The Homeric influences in this passage have been identified and adequately discussed by scholars, see for instance Lefkowitz 1969, 65–67; Goldhill 1983, 71–72; Maehler 2004, 117–119; Cairns 2010, 227–230 and Dova 2012, 78–79. On the use and function of epithets in Bacchylides see Dolfi 2010.

20 Cf. the tripartite division of the cosmos in *Il*. 15.187–192 where the sky is assigned to Zeus, the sea to Poseidon and the underworld to Hades.

21 Lefkowitz 1969. Heracles uses the same words when he recalls his quest for Cerberus in Hades (*Od*. 11.623). The main difference of course is the reversal of roles since here Heracles is the visitor in Hades rather than the host.

while maintaining the contrast of light and darkness between the realms of the living and the dead, at the same time capitalises on the Homeric paretymology of Hades as the unseen (A – ides). Not only does Heracles' *katabasis* recall the hero's appearance in the 'Nekyia' but with him the same dark and murky Underworld we know from *Odyssey* 11 is evoked.[22]

Following Heracles' appearance, the shades of the dead are introduced into the scene. Once again Homeric language and imagery are recalled: the souls are those of 'wretched mortals' (5.63 δυστάνων),[23] and gather by the shores of the river Cocytus like leaves (5. 64–7), a clear allusion to the much-discussed simile in the *Iliad* where the generations of men are compared to leaves.[24] By maintaining his dialogue with the Homeric text, Bacchylides succeeds in establishing an epic frame for the narrative that will follow, while through the sustained use of allusions to the 'Nekyia', he foreshadows the underworld nature of Meleager's story: as we are about to see, the shade's story, taking place within Hades, departs from its epic origins to adopt and project a subjective perspective which finds great affinity with the stories of the heroines and heroes of *Odyssey* 11. This I argue is part of the strategy the poet follows throughout the ode.

The scene having been set up, the hero's shade is introduced into the narrative:

ταῖσιν δὲ μετέπρεπεν εἴδω-
λον θρασυμέμνονος ἐγ-
χεσπάλου Πορθανίδα:
τὸν δ' ὡς ἴδεν Ἀλκμήνιος θαυμαστὸς ἥρως
τεύχεσι λαμπόμενον,
νευρὰν ἐπέβασε λιγυκλαγγῆ κορώνας,
χαλκεόκρανον δ' ἔπειτ' ἐξ-
είλετο ϝιὸν ἀνα-
πτύξας φαρέτρας πῶμα

(*Ode* 5.68–76)

22 See for instance Antikleia's advice to Odysseus to "seek the light" in *Od*. 11.224: ἀλλὰ φόωσδε τάχιστα λιλαίεο.

23 The adjective δύστηνος is used three times in *Odyssey* 11: two by Odysseus for the soul of Elpenor, arguably a wretched shade, and once by Teiresias for Odysseus.

24 *Il*. 6.146–149. For the Homeric simile see Kokolakis 2000 and Graziosi/Haubold 2010, 116. For the simile's reception in Archaic Lyric see Sider 2001. Finally see Maehler 2004, 118, who argues that Bacchylides employs it to portray the souls as innumerable and not as a reference to the human condition.

> Among them there stood out the image of the brave-spirited, spear-wielding son of Porthaon. When the wondrous hero, the son of Alcmena, saw him gleaming in his armour, he set the shrill-ringing bowstring on the end of his bow and then opened the lid of his quiver and took out a bronze-headed arrow.

The shade that Heracles sees has little to do with the rest of the dead who stand on the shores of Cocytus. Instead of being wretched, Meleager's *eidolon* is described as that of a brave-hearted spear-wielder warrior (5.69–70 θρασυμέμνονος ἐγ/χεσπάλου) who shines in his armour (5.73 τεύχεσι λαμπόμενον). Similarly to Heracles' introduction, the name of the hero is missing but the accumulation of epic epithets suggests that we are confronted with the shade of a man of high stature. It is only when his papponymic (5.70 Πορθανίδα) is mentioned that we can securely identify the shade as that of Meleager.[25]

The first epithet the poet uses for Meleager, θρασυμέμνων ('brave-hearted'), is quite important since, before Bacchylides, it is used only in Homer and exclusively for Heracles (*Il*. 5.639 and more importantly *Od*. 11.267); in this respect Bacchylides, by alluding to the Homeric text, not only creates a link between the two heroes, as Lefkowitz argues,[26] but also subtly reverses their roles by assigning one's traditional epithet to the other. The placement of θρασυμέμνων right after εἴδωλον and before ἐγχεσπάλου, another adjective with clear epic connotations,[27] invites the audience to search in their mental storehouse of traditional epithets for a match with one of the great heroes of the past, thus creating a visual image based on the cultural and traditional significance of the adjectives used. And that is when a certain confusion is created since, as we saw, the epithet θρασυμέμνων is only used in the earlier tradition for Heracles. The confusion is of course resolved at the end of the line with the mention of Meleager's papponymic, however the effect of anticipation created by the poet remains: the audience not only recalls Odysseus' meeting with the shade but is

25 Heroes are often identified by the name of their grandfather rather than their father, see for instance Achilles whose papponymic is often used in the *Iliad* in the formula ποδώκεος Αἰακίδαο (*Il*. 2.860, 874, etc.) and elsewhere.

26 See Lefkowitz 1969, 66 who argues that Bacchylides links the two heroes with the use of θρασυμέμνων in order to highlight the common fate they will share, namely death at the hands of a woman. See also Brannan 1972, 234–235, Segal 1976, 115–116 and Cairns 2010, 229.

27 The adjective is found three times in the *Iliad*, once to underline the bravery of the Trojan allies at *Il*. 2.131, once for Polydamas at *Il*. 14.449, and finally for Ares at *Il*. 15.605.

also invited to follow the present underworld encounter by having the Homeric parallel in mind.[28]

The visual character of the scene is further emphasised by the fact that Bacchylides has Heracles single out Meleager from the scores of souls by being able to see him (5.71 ἴδεν). This reference to seeing comes right after the strong visual contrast between the bright light of Zeus's thunder and the murky darkness of Persephone's abode; the implication is that Heracles' vision in Hades, similarly to Odysseus in *Odyssey* 11, remains unhindered. This is clear by the particular visual detail that draws Heracles' attention to the shade: Meleager is seen standing shining in his armour (5.72 τεύχεσι λαμπόμενον), differing distinctly from the pitiful spectacle of the shades around him. Bacchylides' choice of words proves interesting since, besides the fact that the description recalls that of Heracles with his golden belt in *Od*. 11,[29] this particular combination of noun + adjective also appears to look back at Homer.[30] That in itself is, of course, not surprising since we have already noted the poet's intention to retain an epic tone in the scene and the use of a well-known Iliadic formula certainly contributes to portraying Meleager as a great hero of the past. However, by choosing the participle λαμπόμενος, Bacchylides adds to the visual impact of Meleager's appearance and further hints towards Heracles' ability to clearly see the shade. In fact, the whole introduction is reminiscent of Odysseus' visual ability in *Odyssey* 11 and the way we see it unfold there. In particular, we recall that Odysseus' visual account of Hades began with the general image of the emerging scores of the dead (*Od*. 11.36–37), gradually moved to particular details of their appearance such as the bloody armour worn by some (*Od*. 11.37–40), and finally focused on the coming shade of Elpenor (*Od*. 11.51–54). What we see here follows along the same lines as Bacchylides has Heracles see first the panoramic view of the countless souls standing by Cocytus and then focuses his hero's sight on the particular brightness of Meleager's shade.[31]

28 The verb λέγουσι in particular recalls earlier traditional narratives, as happens for instance in *Pyth*. 6.21–23 where Pindar employs the verb φημί (φαντί) to refer to the mythic past.

29 Heracles' belt is not only golden (χρύσεος) but also a miracle of craftsmanship leading to an *ekphrasis* of unusual detail within the darkness of Homeric Hades, *Od*. 11.609–614. By describing Meleager as the shining one Bacchylides succeeds in inverting Heracles' role once again.

30 *Il*. 17.214; 18.520 and 20.46, cf. Cairns 2010, 229–230.

31 That the effect desired by the poet is that of a strong visual contrast between the murky surroundings and the brightness of Meleager's appearance can be understood if we look at the further uses of the participle λαμπόμενος in the *Iliad*. More specifically the variants λαμπομενάων/λαμπομένης are used to describe the heroes' helmets in battle collectively (*Il*. 13.341–342) and Achilles' helmet in particular (16.70–71), whereas Hector is described rushing into battle as

It would seem then that Bacchylides structures the opening of his katabatic scene around the theme of visibility in a way that is reminiscent of Odysseus' *katabasis* in the 'Nekyia'. Heracles sees the shades with the same ease as Odysseus and at the same time he can distinguish the important ones among them. By doing so, the hero again follows in the literary footsteps of Odysseus, since he is willing to prolong his stay in the Underworld in order to interview the shade of the warrior in front of him. In both cases we can infer that the motive is no other than curiosity.

Already the initial reaction of Heracles to the sight of Meleager's shade recalls the description of the hero in *Odyssey* 11. Even with the roles reversed and Heracles being now the intruder in Hades, the image of the warrior who is always ready to let his arrows fly at his pursuers reminds us of the constant tension in the hero's life. In the Homeric 'Nekyia' the same alertness followed Heracles' *eidolon* in the Underworld, thus for Bacchylides' hero, who is still alive and, as he remarks himself in *Ode* 5.89–91, under pursue by Hera, that reaction is only natural.

Meleager is able to recognise Heracles upon seeing him despite the fact that they had never met, in similar fashion with Teiresias' recognition of Odysseus in *Od*. 11.91, and he is the first to speak. His reassurance that Heracles has nothing to fear from the dead is indeed successful and despite Heracles' initial alarmed reaction, the hero's curiosity prevails and he decides to postpone his quest in order to ask Meleager who he might be and who had killed him:

θάμβησεν δ' ἄναξ
Ἀμφιτρυωνιάδας,
εἶπέν τε· τίς ἀθανάτων
ἢ βροτῶν τοιοῦτον ἔρνος
θρέψεν ἐν ποίᾳ χθονί;
τίς δ' ἔκτανεν; ἦ τάχα καλλίζωνος Ἥρα
κεῖνον ἐφ' ἁμετέρᾳ
πέμψει κεφαλᾷ· τὰ δέ που
Παλλάδι ξανθᾷ μέλει.

(*Ode* 5.84–92)

λαμπόμενος πυρί (*Il*. 15.623). The last example makes it clear that the image conveyed is that of blazing fire and this is further correlated by the use of the variant λαμπομενάων in a domestic environment for the light of torches (*Il*. 19.48; *Od*. 23.290 δαΐδων ὑπὸ λαμπομενάων). Simply put, the participle is used by Homer to describe the brightness of flames and as such its use by Bacchylides appears to have a similar effect.

> The lord, the son of Amphitryon, was amazed and said,
> "What immortal or mortal raised such an offshoot, in what land?
> Who killed you? Surely beautiful-girdled Hera will soon send him
> against my head. But these things, I suppose, are the care of
> yellow-haired Pallas.

It is this decision, namely to prolong his stay in Hades in order to hear what the shade has to say, that initiates the underworld narrative and, I would argue, signals the transition to the poetics of Hades:[32] as we are about to see, by allowing Meleager to take the stage, Heracles opens the door to an unmediated retelling of the past focalised through the shade's very personal perspective.[33] Once again Bacchylides takes his cue from Homer since it was a similar curiosity that kept Odysseus in Hades in *Od*. 11 long enough to inquiry of the heroines' birth and stories there, thus initiating the multiple and diverse underworld accounts that followed.[34] The shade's first reaction to Heracles' questions is quite different from what we might have expected from the great hero who still shines in his armour, as Meleager bursts into tears (5.94 δακρυόεις) and begins to relate his story starting from the sending of the boar to Calydon by Artemis.[35] For the most part his narrative follows the general outline of the tradition: Artemis is angry at Oineus and sends forth a boar that ravages the fields and herds of Calydon and kills anyone that stands up against it (5.93–110). Meleager decides to take action and comes up against the boar along with a band of heroes:

32 For the term see Gazis 2018.

33 The story of the meeting of Heracles with Meleager was also told by Pindar (fr. 249a M), however, as a the Iliadic scholiast informs us in ΣA *ad Il.* 21.194, the focus of Pindar's account was most likely on the duel of Heracles with Acheloous for the hand of Deianeira, that followed the meeting of the hero with the shade. Since the fragment cannot be dated with any certainty it is impossible to determine whether one accounted was influenced by, or innovated upon, the other. Cf. Maehler 2004, 107–198.

34 Odysseus has no reason to prolong his stay in Hades after he received Teiresias' prophecy but he decides to stay in order to interview the heroines' shades that have gathered around him:

Od. 11.229–30: αἱ δ' ἀμφ' αἷμα κελαινὸν ἀολλέες ἠγερέθοντο,
αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ βούλευον ὅπως ἐρέοιμι ἑκάστην.
They gathered in throngs around the dark blood
and I took counsel with myself how to question them all.

35 Again, a common motif in *Odyssey* 11 where we have seen most of the shades weeping before relating their stories, e. g. Elpenor at *Od*. 11.59 and Antikleia at 11.154.

τῷ δὲ στυγερὰν δῆριν Ἑλλάνων ἄριστοι
στασάμεθ' ἐνδυκέως
ἕξ ἄματα συνεχέως· ἐπεὶ δὲ δαίμων
κάρτος Αἰτωλοῖς ὄρεξεν,
θάπτομεν οὓς κατέπε-
φνεν σῦς ἐριβρύχας ἐπαΐσσων βίᾳ,
Ἄγκαῖον ἐμῶν τ' Ἄγέλαον
φ[έρτ]ατον κεδνῶν ἀδελφεῶν,
οὓς τέ]κεν ἐν μεγάροις
πατρὸ]ς Ἀλθαία περικλειτοῖσιν Οἰνέος·
(*Ode* 5.111–120)

Against it we, the best of the Greeks, put up a hateful struggle steadfastly for six days continuously. And when the daimon handed victory to the Aetolians we buried those the loud-roaring boar had killed, as it rushed at them with force, Ancaeus and Agelaus, the best of my trusty brothers, [the sons] whom Althaea bore in Oeneus' famous palace.

The reference to the 'best of the Greeks', an expression with clear Iliadic undertones, invites us to believe that we are following the recounting of a heroic exploit. In this respect the next two lines come as a surprise, since the expected description of a heroic triumph is replaced by the modest reference to victory given to the heroes by an unspecified god (5.113, δαίμων).[36] Such a humble perspective on one of the most well-known feats of the heroic tradition is surprising to say the least, but perhaps even more striking is the fact that it comes from Meleager himself, who was remembered by the tradition as the actual slayer of the beast. Already in *Iliad* 9, Phoenix recounts the story as part of the established tradition:

μέμνημαι τόδε ἔργον ἐγὼ πάλαι οὔ τι νέον γε
ὡς ἦν. ἐν δ' ὑμῖν ἐρέω πάντεσσι φίλοισι.
(*Il.* 9.527–528)

I remember this deed which is not recent at all,
but old. I will tell to you, who are all my friends.

The story of the Calydonian boar is already an old deed (ἔργον … πάλαι), and when Phoenix recalls it he specifically names Meleager as the hero who killed the boar:

36 A sense of modesty seems to be implied also in the use of ἐνδυκέως, which seems to imply a stalemate rather than heroic fighting, see Lefkowitz 1976, 61 f.

τὸν δ' υἱὸς Οἰνῆος ἀπέκτεινεν Μελέαγρος
πολλέων ἐκ πολίων θηρήτορας ἄνδρας ἀγείρας
καὶ κύνας. οὐ μὲν γάρ κε δάμη παύροισι βροτοῖσι.
(*Il.* 9.543–545)

The son of Oeneus, Meleager, killed it,
having gathered hunting men and hounds from many cities.
For it could not be tamed by only a few men.

We can see that the setting is similar to the one used by Bacchylides however with one important difference: whereas in the Homeric narrative the active agent behind the hunt and indeed the very slayer of the beast is unambiguously Meleager (9.543–544 ἀπέκτεινεν Μελέαγρος ... ἄνδρας ἀγείρας / καὶ κύνας), in Bacchylides the best of the Greeks appear to gather by common consent (5.112 στασάμεθ') and the victory is not won by the hero but instead given collectively to the Aetolians by a god (5.113–114).[37] It appears that when Meleager recounts the story in Hades, he is not interested in taking credit for the killing of the beast; instead the shade seems to relate the incident with the boar only in order to introduce the dispute that followed it: an argument over the spoils that caused a fight during which he killed his maternal uncles, Iphiclus and Aphares:

ἔνθ' ἐγὼ πολλοῖς σὺν ἄλλοις
Ἴφικλον κατέκτανον
ἐσθλόν τ' Ἀφάρητα, θοοὺς μάτρωας· οὐ γὰρ
καρτερόθυμος Ἄρης
κρίνει φίλον ἐν πολέμῳ,
τυφλὰ δ' ἐκ χειρῶν βέλη
ψυχαῖς ἔπι δυσμενέων φοι-
τᾷ θάνατόν τε φέρει
τοῖσιν ἂν δαίμων θέλῃ·
(*Ode* 5.127–135)

37 Meleager's modesty has not escaped the attention of scholars who have interpreted it in various ways. Lefkowitz 1976, 62, notes the «absence of traditional heroism» from the poem in general, whereas Maehler comments that «the hero modestly shares his triumph with the other Aitolians», 2004, 122. See also Burnett 1985, 142 and Cairns 2010, 236. Apollodorus' version provides us with what would have been the epic version of the story in which the fatal blow dealt by the hero would have been described in detail; *Lib*.1.8.2: τὸν δὲ κάπρον πρώτη μὲν Ἀταλάντη εἰς τὰ νῶτα ἐτόξευσε, δεύτερος δὲ Ἀμφιάραος εἰς τὸν ὀφθαλμόν· Μελέαγρος δὲ αὐτὸν εἰς τὸν κενεῶνα πλήξας ἀπέκτεινε.

> Then I killed among many others Iphiclus
> and noble Aphares, nimble brothers of my mother.
> For hard-hearted Ares does not distinguish friends
> in battle. Blind do the missiles go from one's hand against
> the souls of one's adversaries and bring death to whoever the
> daimōn wills.

These lines deserve careful consideration as they reveal Meleager's subjective perspective of his own actions. A heroic tone is re-introduced in lines 127–129 as Meleager appears to be boasting of killing his uncles 'among many others'; for an audience well-versed in heroic poetry the act of killing scores of enemies would most certainly recall an *aristeia*, the trademark of great heroes, and at first the effect here seems to be similar. However, already from the end of line 129 the point is negated with the use of οὐ γάρ which introduces the true meaning of the hero's words: 'hard-hearted Ares does not distinguish friends in battle'.[38]

Maehler sees here a parallel with line 537 in *Odyssey* 11 where Odysseus states that «Ares rages indiscriminately»,[39] thus identifying in the lines a common literary theme adopted by Bacchylides.[40] However in the Odyssean passage and generally in Homer, the intended message is that it is very difficult for a hero to come out of the battle unscathed and indeed Sarpedon makes precisely that point when he refers to the thousand fates of death that hang around heroes in the battlefield.[41] What we have however in Meleager's speech appears to be quite different since the hero makes a case about what seems to have been the accidental killing of his uncles. As Burnett argues,[42] his words seem to have an apologetic character and, as we observed with the killing of the boar, here too recalling his

38 The shift in focus becomes more prominent once we recall that Meleager in Homer is specifically said to be "dear to Ares" (*Il.* 9.550 Μελέαγρος ἄρηι φίλος πολέμιζε).

39 *Od.* 11.537 ἐπιμὶξ δέ τε μαίνεται Ἄρης. See Maehler 2004, 123.

40 Indeed, the motif of war as a destructive force, often personified as Ares, is pertinent throughout the Homeric epics and perhaps a closer parallel to Meleager's statement is offered by Homer's comment that one could not tell which side Diomedes was fighting for during his *aristeia* – such was the confusion caused by the hero's excessive fighting force, see *Il.* 5.85–86.

41 *Il.* 12.326–7: νῦν δ' ἔμπης γὰρ κῆρες ἐφεστᾶσιν θανάτοιο
μυρίαι, ἃς οὐκ ἔστι φυγεῖν βροτὸν οὐδ' ὑπαλύξαι
But now a thousand fates stand around us
from whom a mortal man cannot escape or run away.
See also the description of the battle on Achilles' shield (*Il.* 18.535–538) where Strife, Kydoimos and the fate of death (Κῆρ) drag the heroes from the battlefield while still alive.

42 Burnett 1985, 143, states that Meleager «killed ... without intention, or decision, or passion, and he explicitly refuses all responsibility for this nongesture by calling it the undiscriminating work of Ares and fate».

excellence in battle does not seem to rank high in Meleager's interests. Rather, his comment that Ares does not discriminate between friend and enemy reveals an attempt by the shade to justify the killing of his uncles: if missiles fly blindly from one's hand in battle and Ares is responsible for whomever they hit, then surely Meleager cannot be blamed for the death of Iphiclus and Aphares. In the hero's opinion after all it was just an unfortunate accident. Again tradition and underworld narrative are conflicted, since, as Cairns also notes, Apollodorus maintains the tradition in which the killing of Meleager's uncles is a deliberate act of rage, triggered by the dispute over the boar's hide:[43]

> ὀργισθεὶς δὲ Μελέαγρος τοὺς μὲν Θεστίου παῖδας ἀπέκτεινε, τὸ δὲ δέρας ἔδωκε τῇ Ἀταλάντῃ. Ἀλθαία δὲ λυπηθεῖσα ἐπὶ τῇ τῶν ἀδελφῶν ἀπωλείᾳ τὸν δαλὸν ἧψε, καὶ ὁ Μελέαγρος ἐξαίφνης ἀπέθανεν.
>
> (*Lib.* 1.8.3)

> But Meleager in a rage slew the sons of Thestius and gave the skin to Atalanta. However, from grief at the slaughter of her brothers Althaea kindled the brand, and Meleager immediately expired.

Any reference to anger (ὀργισθείς) as a motive for the killing is omitted from the shade's account and this omission has implications on a different level for the hero's tradition as it puts into question the reasoning behind Althaea's decision to avenge her brothers by killing her son. Indeed, Meleager is quick to make a point about his mother's unjustified actions that caused his demise:

> ταῦτ' οὐκ ἐπιλεξαμένα
> Θεστίου κούρα δαΐφρων
> μάτηρ κακόποτμος ἐμοὶ
> βούλευσεν ὄλεθρον ἀτάρβακτος γυνά
>
> (*Ode* 5.136–139)

> Giving no thought to that, Thestius' fiery minded daughter,
> my mother of evil fate, dauntless woman, she plotted my destruction.

The accumulation of negative epithets for Althaea betrays the shade's emotional engagement with its own narration: Althaea is called δαΐφρων, κακόποτμος and ἀτάρβακτος γυνά in just 3 lines in what recalls the formulaic titles of Homeric heroes but is of course very different in content and impact.[44] What is more, the

43 Cf. Cairns 2010, 237.

44 Contrast for instance the frequent one line formula for Odysseus: διογενὲς Λαερτιάδη, πολυμήχαν' Ὀδυσσεῦ, which combines genealogical information with traditional epithets.

epithets have a particular significance because they are focalised through Meleager's perspective: Althaea is not just *fiery minded* and *dauntless*, but most importantly *the mother of evil fate*, and the epithet κακόποτμος can be understood properly if the line is spoken by Meleager only.
The act of burning the log that signals the end of the hero's life takes a prominent place in the narrative:

καῖέ τε δαιδαλέας
ἐκ λάρνακος ὠκύμορον
φιτρὸν ἀγκλαύσασα, τὸν δὴ
μοῖρ' ἐπέκλωσεν τότε
ζωᾶς ὅρον ἀμετέρας ἔμμεν. τύχον μὲν
Δαϊπύλου Κλύμενον
παῖδ' ἄλκιμον ἐξεναρί-
ζων ἀμώμητον δέμας,
πύργων προπάροιθε κιχήσας·
τοὶ δὲ πρὸς εὐκτιμέναν
φεῦγον ἀρχαίαν πόλιν
Πλευρῶνα: μινύνθη δέ μοι ψυχὰ γλυκεῖα,
γνῶν δ' ὀλιγοσθενέων·
αἰαῖ: πύματον δὲ πνέων δάκρυσα τλ[άμων
ἀγλαὰν ἥβαν προλείπων.
(*Ode* 5.140–154)

And took from the log of swift destiny from the ornate chest, and burned it. Destiny had spun that it should at that moment be the limit of my life. At that very moment I was stripping the armour from mighty Clymenus, the son of Deipylus, a blameless body, having caught him in front of the wall. For they were fleeing for their ancient fortified city of Pleuron. My sweet life dwindled away, and I knew that I had little strength, alas! And, as I breathed my last, I wept in my suffering at leaving behind my glorious youth.

Meleager's narrative takes here an interesting turn as the hero appears to temporarily possess a kind of poetic omniscience by describing in paratactic sequence events that occur simultaneously.[45] We are first taken inside Althaea's house where we see her take the log out of the chest and burn it. The insistence on visual details, such as the characterisation of the chest as ornate (δαιδαλέας) and the log as fast burning (ὠκύμορον) give a bard-like quality to Meleager's narrative, who relates events he had not seen but can describe as if he had seen them. The use

Lefkowitz 1976, 65 and Pinsent 1985, 7, draw attention to the fact that Althaea's main quality stressed in the text is that of a woman; see further the discussion in Cairns 2010, 238.
45 This is a typical narrative strategy in Homer, see Clay 2011, 1–14. For parataxis in Meleager's narration see Gentili 1958, 23 and Stern 1967, 37.

of τύχον at the end of line 144 signals an abrupt transition of the action in front of the city walls and with it the narrative shifts: we now see the action through Meleager's eyes while he strips Clymenus' armour, whom he caught while fleeing towards Pleuron.

This surely qualifies as a heroic action since despoiling an enemy is indeed one of the trademarks of a hero's conduct. However, what follows the description of Meleager's actions in line 151 comes again as a surprise and creates a sharp contrast with the heroic nature of the shade's performance on the battlefield. Meleager mentions Pleuron, the town described in lines 149–150 and also the place of his death,[46] and suddenly his focus turns abruptly from the description of his actions to his internal turmoil as he first experiences the consequences of his mother's actions. The effect is tragic as Meleager's heroic feat is not crowned with the expected *kleos* but instead with an untimely death. The account is full of pathos, starting from an awareness of the first signs of weakening (μινύνθη ... ψυχά) and moving towards the realisation (γνῶν) of the hero's paradoxical end. His death is expressed as lack of strength (ὀλιγοσθενέων) which alludes to Hector's final moments in *Iliad* 22, replacing the Homeric ὀλιγοδρανέων.[47] However, to understand the scene as simply modelled on the Homeric description misses an important point of Bacchylides' narrative strategy: what is narrated by the poet in the *Iliad*, is here described by the character himself as it is not Bacchylides who informs us that Meleager lost his strength, but instead the hero himself, and what is more, in his own voice. In fact, Meleager takes us through the experience of his death step by step and in doing so offers us the opportunity to experience through him what dying feels like. In this respect the narrative bears close similarity with Agamemnon's description of his own death in *Od*. 11 where again we are made privy to the perspective of the dying hero. There we heard the dead king describe his final moments in terms of what was happening around him (Cassandra's murder, 11.422–423) and his final attempt for resistance (11.423, χεῖρας ἀείρων). Here however, Bacchylides goes a step further by having Meleager give a detailed description of his end in both physical (μινύνθη / ὀλιγοσθενέων) and cognitive terms (γνῶν). Furthermore, what starts as an allusion to Hector's death in the *Iliad*, soon takes a very different turn with the introduction into the narrative of Meleager's actual lamentation. Again Bacchylides departs from the Homeric norm by having the shade's wailing literally heard within the text: αἰαῖ!,[48] instead

46 Lefkowitz 1976, 66.

47 Cf. *Iliad* 22.337–363 and also 16.843 where ὀλιγοδρανέων is used for the dying Patroclus. On the Homeric description as a model for Bacchylides see Lefkowitz 1976, 66, Maehler 2004, 124 and Cairns 2010, 240.

48 Goldhill 1983.

of reporting it as the Homeric narrator does when the soul leaves the body.[49] Bacchylides appears then to take the immediacy of the shades' narrative of their personal stories to a new level by allowing Meleager's wailing to echo in the Underworld and in doing so an emotional peak is reached and Hades is momentarily transformed into a dramatic stage with the shade in its centre.[50] Meleager's narrative is so powerful that even the mighty Heracles is moved to tears:

φασὶν ἀδεισιβόαν
Ἀμφιτρύωνος παῖδα μοῦνον δὴ τότε
τέγξαι βλέφαρον, ταλαπενθέος
πότμον οἰκτίροντα φωτός
(*Ode* 5.155–158)

They say that the son of Amphitryon, undaunted by the war-cry
then and then alone wetted his eyes, pitying the destiny of a man
enduring suffering.

Bacchylides breaks Meleager's narrative and reassumes the role of the narrator in order to describe Heracles' reaction. With the shift of focus we see the most prominent Greek hero crying for the first and last time.[51] Maehler's comment that «in the older (epic?) versions of his myth, it is hard to imagine Heracles shedding tears», highlights the absurdity of such a scene.[52] Hades however is, as we have also observed in *Odyssey* 11, the only place where the peculiar and rare sight of Heracles shedding tears can be seen. Bacchylides takes advantage of the distinctive nature of the Underworld in order to capture and immortalise that very special moment in the whole of Greek poetic tradition. By doing so, the poet at the same time comments actively on the uniqueness of his own art, which proves capable of bringing to light, along with Meleager's alternative narrative, Heracles' only moment of emotional weakness.[53]

Heracles responds to the shade's story with a *gnome*, commenting that it is better for mortals not to have been born and seen the light of the sun (5.160–161). The fact that Heracles is in Hades where the light of the sun cannot be seen

49 See *Il.* 16.856 for Patroclus' soul and 22.362 for Hector's.
50 See Burnett 1985, 144, who likens the speech of Meleager to that of a messenger from Attic tragedy.
51 At least until Virgil's *Aeneid* 10.464–465 where Heracles, already deified, weeps for the death of Pallas.
52 Maehler 2004, 125.
53 The motif of Heracles' tears being the first and last is later picked up by Sophocles in the *Trachiniae* 1070–1075 and by Euripides in *Heracles* 1354–1356, see Cairns 2010, 240–241.

makes his words sound almost ironic. And indeed in the next line (5.162), the hero returns to his normal self by focusing on the tasks at hand and asking Meleager if he has a sister in his house that Heracles could marry. The underworld scene comes to an end with the ominous mention of Deianeira by Meleager, the woman that will cause the end of Heracles and reunite him with Meleager in the Underworld, this time however as shade.[54]

Conclusions

Bacchylides' *Ode* 5 is unique in many ways, nonetheless for its mythical content which at first perhaps appears not to complement the subject of a victory ode. The underworld narrative of Heracles' meeting with the shade of Meleager hardly seems to fit, from the perspective of a modern audience at least, the context of the praising of Hieron for his win in the single horse race – a rather important, politically and in terms of prestige, event. However, through my reading of the text I hope to have shown that Bacchylides' choice of theme is successful. By presenting the story of Meleager through an underworld perspective in which heroic *kleos* means little, the poet succeeds in bringing to the spotlight the main Greek anxiety lurking behind any mortal praise: namely the need for modesty in front of mankind's fragile and ephemeral nature. Bacchylides shows us one of the greatest heroes of the epic and mythic tradition, but even though we are led to believe we will hear the narration of heroic feats we are only, and quite unexpectedly, given a subjective recollection coloured in sadness, regret and self-pity. This is achieved through the use of the poetics of Hades, which Bacchylides inherits from Homer: in many ways what we see in *Ode* 5 reflects the same motifs we encounter in *Odyssey* 11 with the shades of the great heroes and heroines of the past relating their stories from a personal point of view with any details they choose to highlight, disclose or altogether omit.

Bacchylides exploits this narrative strategy in order to highlight the limitations of human achievement and prosperity, a theme that goes hand in hand with epinician poetry, while at the same innovating upon the Homeric model of the poetics of Hades. Whereas Homer's shades relate their stories through Odysseus' narration, in direct or indirect speech, Bacchylides' Meleager occupies the stage on his own and takes us through his agonising last minutes by describing what dying feels like. His lamentation, deserving an equal role in his narrative, can

54 Interestingly, after he himself have been burned, see *Trach.* 1193 ff.

be heard in Hades and in so doing is transferred by the poet into the light of day along with his tragic tale. By structuring his underworld narrative in *Ode* 5 around the themes of seeing and storytelling in the Nekyia, Bacchylides presents us with a Meleager who glosses over his heroic actions and moments of glory in favour for a more emotional and subjective view of his past, filled with regret and self-pity. In this respect the hero is no different from the ghost of Achilles who dismisses honour after death for the simple privilege of seeing the light of the sun, or Agamemnon who is consumed by the memory of his wife's treachery while having nothing to say about his glorious exploits at Troy. By following into Homer's steps through the gates of Hades, Bacchylides accesses the storehouse of underworld tradition and allows Meleager's plea for justice to be heard and an old story to be told anew.

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